

Arlene Zeichner Video Art Distribution

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In 1983, according to a survey conducted by the Media Alliance, the seven top video art distributors in America accrued less than \$300,000 in revenues. The figure is shamefully low - \$100,000 less than the average budget for a single half-hour broadcast television show. The total is minute even by art-world standards, amounting to little more than what a hot painter like Julian Schnabel receives for three or four paintings. Even the hottest video artists rarely make more \$10,000 per year from screenings of their work; the merely successful make less than \$1,000 annually. Any video artist would live well below the poverty line if forced to rely on monies received from distribution of his or her work.

Without a doubt, all players in the video distribution arena would welcome increased revenues. Yet the present distribution structure relies heavily on the low or non-profit segment of the video viewing market. Respondents to the Media Alliance survey - Art Metropole, Castelli-Sonnabend, The Cunningham Foundation, Electronic Arts Intermix, The Kitchen, University Community Video, Video Databank - indicated that almost 54 percent of their rentals are to schools, an exhibition channel notoriously low on cash flow. Another 24 percent of their rentals are to museums, galleries and media centers, more venues with little cash to spare. The remainder of the market is devoted to festivals (9.5 percent of rentals), cable/broadcast (5 percent), home video (3 percent), libraries (2.5 percent), private collectors (1.5 percent), and other (1 percent). Clearly, if video art is to become a more lucrative endeavor, it must reach a wider audience through well-funded distribution channels.

However, video distributors' goals vary widely. Some wish only to reach the standard art audience, while others ambitiously hope to grab a cash-rich segment of the mass market. In fact, all distributors seem to share is an almost evangelical perspective on the inadequacies of broadcast TV and a reverent attitude towards video art-though concepts of what constitutes "good" video art are quite divergent.

Perhaps the most conservative distribution strategy is to continue relying on educational venues. Yet Chris Straayer, of Chicago's Video Data Bank, sees it as the most practical plan. "All artists think the public will want them if only they could get on TV That's a naive assumption," says Straayer. "Most screenings of video art are attended primarily by video artists." She explains that video art may not yet be ready for mass-market venues. "People get more exposure to video art through schools," she says, "That's the state of video art right now, until it's made its way to more gallery and public screening situations. It's almost a third stage to reach the general public."

Right now, Video Data Bank distributes over 200 video art tapes to schools, a few music clubs and museums across the country. The rental fee for 80 percent of the tapes is \$50 per screening for works that run under 30 minutes and \$75 per screening for tapes that run more than 30 minutes. (The remaining 20 percent are leased at various higher fees.) When sold tapes under 30 minutes go for \$200, while longer tapes cost \$275. The revenues are split with 40 percent going to Video Data Bank and the remainder going to the artist. Straayer concedes that it's not a profitable venture, admitting that the center is dependent upon support from the Art Institute of Chicago, the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts for its very existence.

Though Video Data Bank expects to rely on public support for quite some time, its directors are interested in increasing earned income through expanded distribution activities. They are curating several shows that target specific audiences outside their usual exhibition venues, including shows devoted to political and feminist work. Expanding further into European distribution and home video is a future possibility. Yet as Straayer makes clear, they inch forward with caution. After all, she says, "you have to decide whether the new venue is worth more and more sales."

Barbara Osborn, director of distribution at New York City's Kitchen Center, sees the expansion of markets as a must. The Kitchen distributes over 400 tapes to museums, schools, libraries and media centers across the world at rental rates that range between \$50 and \$100 per tape. Osborn, however, wants mass audiences to become aware of video art as well.

Such ambition does not jibe well with the market's current limitations. Osborn says she is "not happy with the educational market. Showing tapes to 25 students is OK, but it's not much." For Osborn, video utopia could be achieved by placing work on broadcast TV. As she sees it, "There's a kind of unconscious relationship between people and TV. People are really accepting of what comes through the networks. Artists could get the audience for a one-hour show per day. But they couldn't get the sponsors."

This winter, Osborn and the Kitchen's video curator, Amy Taubin, will be packaging shows for WNYC, a public television station managed by the city of New York. Each of the six half-hour shows will be devoted to a different theme in video art. The presentation, intended to introduce what Osborn calls a "lay audience" to video art aesthetics, will be informational as well as entertaining. Ideally, these shows will convince network programmers to try a bit of video art in their 1985 schedules.

Much as Osborn would like to devote her time to the expanding distribution options offered by such channels as WNYC, she is mandated to maintain and stabilize the Kitchen's existing distribution system. Like the Video Data Bank, the Kitchen relies on public funding, and the funders are demanding steady growth in established markets. For the Kitchen that means strengthening its hold in the non-profit sector. Last year, the Kitchen increased revenues by 25 percent; this year it hopes to do the same.

The Kitchen's continued growth results largely from the success of its efforts to distribute to European markets. Osborn explains that "an embarrassing amount of our business is done in Europe, almost 75 percent." Europeans rely on the Kitchen because they are familiar with it as an exhibitor. This fact gives the Kitchen an advantage over video art distributors like EAI or Castelli, neither of which maintains a regular schedule of video art screenings. Yet Osborn fears a backlash from angry European artists who rightfully complain that there is a disproportionate amount of American work shown at European festivals, a courtesy that is not reciprocated by American festival organizers. Yet here adversity may prove to be a hidden strength: If the European video market bottoms out, Osborn may be forced to devote her time to new markets in order to recoup revenues.

Revenues derived from new markets already provide a strong base for the Independent Cinema Artists and Producers (ICAP). Founded by Kitty Morgan in 1975, ICAP is dedicated to marketing independent video and film shorts to domestic and international markets. Most of their 1,000 titles were produced on film; videotape accounts for less than 10 percent of the total.

Morgan points out that the primary difficulty in putting artists' videos on broadcast TV is the works' general lack of broadcast-quality production values. Most artists' videos are produced on relatively inexpensive non-broadcast 3/4 inch equipment. To be exhibited on television the works must be transferred to 1-inch tape, and image quality suffers. As a result, most work is rejected by broadcast interests not because of the subject matter but rather for its inability to meet technical standards.

Despite this difficulty, Morgan has been successful in putting video art's foot in the door. One of the first independents to approach cable, her success is reflected in the fact that work distributed by ICAP has been screened on most national cable services, including HBO, Cinemax, USA and Showtime, as well as on local systems. Yet cable may be drying up for many avant-gardists as programmers become more established and conservative. Morgan explains that "initially there was great openness for non-narrative. As the cable services become more like networks, they go more and more for mainstream, entertainment-type narrative work."

Video artists needn't worry. Morgan is particularly adept at finding new markets as soon as they appear. As she explains, "Whenever something new comes along, we're right there. [With] any new thing that starts up, we'll get in touch with them." Right now she is successfully marketing video to what she calls "blooper shows," like *The Great Space Coaster*, *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and *You Asked for It*. Some in the video art community might consider the airing of their work on such programs sacrilegious, to say the least. Even the less pure at heart might sigh and note with sadness that video art seems to have success only as an oddity or as marginalia.

Morgan, however, allows for no such regrets in her distribution plans. In fact, her only stipulation is that the programmer pay for the program and pay a fair market value. Rates for TV broadcast of shorts are based on the length of the tape and

run from \$20 to \$200 per minute. (She does refer the programmer to the artist in case the artist wants to allow a free screening.) She returns 70 percent of the revenues to the artist. Despite this generous split, video artists appear incapable of earning a living wage from television airings-no ICAP video artist earns more than \$10,000 per year, and most earn far less.

As Morgan, Osborn and Straayer make clear, video art is not receiving the wide distribution it deserves. It is also not likely to do so in the near future, despite the fact that it is related to a distribution channel that reaches 98 percent of American households-broadcast television. Yet, video art just may find a wider audience in another burgeoning market: households with VCRs.

Steve Savage, owner of New Video, three video retail stores in New York, believes that a market for video art already exists among VCR-owners. He wants to take advantage of it-both for its profit-making potential and to help artists increase the distribution of their work. To do so, he and colleague Dan Ochiva launched an ambitious video art retailing program last August. Stating that "We're not going to be cultivating the independent market as much as servicing the one that already exists," Ochiva and Savage are renting and selling over 25 video art titles. The titles are eclectic, ranging from such old favorites as Bill Wegman's early seventies tapes to more controversial work by younger artists like Matthew Geller.

Savage is fronting the money for transferring the artists' tapes from 3/4 inch to the 1/2-inch format favored by consumers, and absorbing all packaging costs. He is also footing the bill for an ad campaign, including ads in major newspapers and a flyer, both of which are geared toward making the public aware of the project. Also, he is including extensive articles on the work in his store's newspaper. Artists can also drop off additional promotional material that Savage will include in mailings to his 2,000 card-carrying video club members.

Every tape is available in both Beta and VHS formats and is rented at the same rates as studio-released movie titles (at press time, the selling price had not yet been determined). Savage estimates the break-even point at about six rentals. He is not sure how popular the tapes will prove to be, but he doesn't expect demand to exceed one tape per day.

Savage's projections for the project are modest, for now at least. He thinks that "New Video will probably lose money for the first year, since they are handling packaging and duplication, and artists won't make any money either." The second and third years, however, look more promising, as more people become aware of the project and more households become equipped with VCRs.

Savage knows that home video is big business and, as a former film school student turned businessman, he hopes that art and commerce will converge in his video stores. If the New York project is a success, he'll make video art available nationwide by masterminding a network of 250 video stores across the country that carry independent video. He also plans to experiment with other modes of merchandising the work, including direct mail and institutional sales.

The Kitchen has supplied tapes to Savage's marketing effort, and ICAP is considering a joint venture with him. No doubt, as word gets out, more video artists and distributors will want to join forces with retailers to expand video's market out of schools and media centers right into America's living rooms. Maybe then video artists will be able to earn their fair share of video revenues - a living wage from their craft.